

"Every man is a plastic artist who must determine things for himself."

Joseph Beuys

SYNOPSIS

Joseph Beuys was a German-born artist active in Europe and the United States from the 1950s through the early 1980s, who came to be loosely associated with that era's international, proto-Conceptual art movement, Fluxus. Beuys's diverse body of work ranges from traditional media of drawing, painting, and sculpture, to process-oriented, or time-based "action" art, the performance of which suggested how art may exercise a healing effect (on both the artist and the audience) when it takes up psychological, social, and/or political subjects. Beuys is especially famous for works incorporating animal fat and felt, two common materials - one organic, the other fabricated, or industrial - that had profound personal meaning to the artist. They were also recurring motifs in works suggesting that art, common materials, and one's "everyday life" were ultimately inseparable.

KEY IDEAS

- Beuys was a key participant in the 1960s Fluxus movement. At that time, many artists in Asia, Europe, and the United States became dissatisfied with a long tradition of "heroic," or object-oriented painting and sculpture (much recently typified by Abstract Expressionism). Influenced in part by contemporary experiments in music, such artists found themselves turning away from the art world's prevailing commercialism in favor of "found" and "everyday" items for creating ephemeral, time-based "happenings," impermanent installation art, and/or other largely action-oriented events.
- From roughly the 1950s through the early 1980s, Beuys demonstrated how art might originate in personal experience yet also address universal artistic, political, and/or social ideas (i.e. topical issues of the day). This is part of the meaning to be gleaned from his 1965 solo performance, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, in which materials of personal significance (one foot wrapped in felt, the cradling of a recently deceased animal) poetically suggest the healing potential of art for a humanity seeking self revitalization and a sense of renewed hope in the future (one should recall that Beuys came of age in the immediate postwar period, when many Germans were just coming to terms with many traumatic aspects of their recent past).
- Beuys suggested, in both his teaching and in his mature "action" and sculptural artworks, that "art" might not ultimately constitute a specialized profession but, rather, a heightened humanitarian attitude, or way of conducting one's life, in every realm of daily activity. In this regard, Beuys's work signals a new era in which art has increasingly become engaged with social commentary and political activism.
- Beuys frequently blurred the lines between art and life, and fact and fiction, by suggesting that what one believed to constitute "reality" mattered more in matters of human action,

social/political behavior, and personal creativity than any definition of everyday reality based on traditional standards of "normalcy," or social codes of so-called "proper" conduct.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Childhood

Joseph Beuys was born in Krefeld, a small city in northwest Germany. He was an only child, to the merchant Josef Jakob Beuys and his wife Johanna Maria Margarete Hulsermann. The two were a devout Catholic couple of the northern Rhine-Westphalian middle-class. Just months after Beuys's birth, the family moved south to the industrial town of Kleve. Beuys would later recall, in an unsubstantiated account, that when, in 1933, the recently formed National Socialist German Workers' Party (or Nazi Party) staged a book-burning rally at Kleve (Beuys would have been aged 12), he rescued from the flames Carolus Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* (1735) - one of history's most groundbreaking works of scientific literature. (In an ironic turn, Beuys was himself compelled by legal fiat to join the Hitler Youth movement by the time he was a teenager).

During Beuys's early education at Kleve, his primary- and secondary-school instructors identified his predilection for drawing and music. In addition to the arts, the young Beuys also demonstrated an aptitude in history, mythology, and the social and natural sciences. Although he finally opted for a career in medicine, Beuys's ambition proved short-lived when, in 1941, he voluntarily enrolled himself in the German air force, or Luftwaffe (allegedly to avoid the draft).

Early training

While Beuys's military subscription was voluntary, he had no desire to see actual combat. Thus in keeping with his interest in medicine, Beuys continued his studies in biology and zoology in the early 1940s. According to his own account of 1979, a pivotal (and, once again, unverifiable) event changed the course of Beuys's life in March of 1944, when his battle plane was shot down over the Crimean Front in the Ukraine. Beuys claims to have been promptly rescued by a nomadic tribe of Tartars, who apparently saved his life by greasing his bruised and battle-weary body with animal fat, before wrapping him entirely -

so as to raise his temperature - in felt. The importance of ancient healing aids - in this case, fat and felt - for enriching and sustaining the human mind, body, and spirit, would come to play an important and highly visible role in much of Beuys's subsequent work as an artist.

It is notable that several eyewitness accounts are on record as contradicting Beuys's romantic and exotic parables; in addition, there were reportedly no Tartar tribesmen occupying the region of Beuys's alleged military plane crash. In any event, a mixture of fact and fiction would come to play a central role in Beuys's later art works. Indeed, Beuys's tale of heroic rescue by Tartars (whether or not true) served as something of a lynchpin for his decision, in the immediate wake of World War II, to devote himself thereafter to art and avant-garde culture.

On resuming his civilian life in 1946, Beuys enrolled in the monumental sculpture program of the Staatliche Kunstakademie Dusseldorf. Beuys responded well to the instruction of Ewald Mataré, at that time a widely popular German painter and sculptor, whose work had once been proclaimed "degenerate" by the Nazis. After several years of distinguishing himself in this intimate class, Beuys was admitted, in 1951, to the more select master sculpture class of Mataré (Beuys finally graduated two years later).

During his latter studies with Mataré, Beuys shared a studio with Erwin Heerich, who would subsequently be celebrated as one of Germany's most important 20th century sculptors. Beuys's major influences during these early years, however, were generally more remote, such as the work of Italian Renaissance painters; the scientific theories of Galileo; the writings of James Joyce; the writings of the German romantics - namely Goethe, Novalis, and Schiller - and the work of various others who Beuys admired for their generally mystical and universal qualities.



The 1950s would prove on the whole a difficult time for Beuys, in regard to both his personal life and his work. Haunted by wartime memories and constantly suffering financial hardship, he devoted the majority of his time to drawing - ultimately creating several thousand works over the course of the decade. Beuys was in pursuit of a new artistic language, one that might emerge from intense solitude and introspection. In keeping with this ambition, he restricted himself to three motifs: animals, the female figure, and landscape. Complementing this creative asceticism, Beuys turned his back on all media other than pencil, ink, and oil pigments. One example of the kind of work that emerged from this intense discipline was *Woman/Animal Skull* (1956-57), a highly personal, experimental and arguably mystical abstraction.

By the early 1960s, Beuys was at work on a series of drawings based on James Joyce's epic novel, *Ulysses* (1918-22). This project was conceived as an extension of the novel itself; indeed, according to Beuys, he created the drawings at Joyce's own request (i.e. as though by way of telepathy, as Joyce had died in 1941). The claim that a literary ghost could act as his personal muse is indicative of Beuys's fascination with a creative process issuing from somewhere between fact and fiction, and physical and metaphysical self constituency, with the result that the simplest gesture might ultimately bear the status of a profound artistic statement.

Mature Period

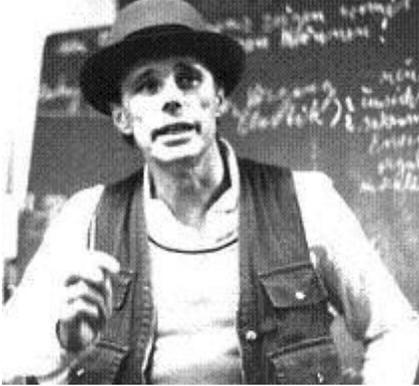
Thus following on the heels of a tumultuous early life, Beuys's first official validation arrived in 1961, when he was appointed Professor of

Monumental Sculpture at the Staatliche Kunstakademie Dusseldorf (where he himself had earlier studied). Beuys made significant waves while occupying this post, first by abolishing all entry requirements (virtually anyone could join his classes), and associating with a group of experimental creatives at Dusseldorf, among them progressive video artist **Nam June Paik**, as well as others closely affiliated with the recently formed **Fluxus Group**.

These new associations would act as a direct influence on Beuys's first ventures in the realm of **performance art**, the resultant works of which have come to epitomize Beuys's aesthetic sensibility in the popular mind. Fluxus stressed the importance of applying oneself to an unusually broad range of media, including painting, drawing, performance, sound art, sculpture, video, collage and poetry. In Beuys's case, his artistic practice covered four major areas: so-called traditional art (painting, drawing, sculpture installation); art performance; art theory and academic teaching; and political activism.

In 1964, while Beuys was in the middle of performing a work at the Technical College Aachen, a student suddenly punched him in the face, bloodying the artist and causing the event to come to an abrupt conclusion. The work would continue to resonate, however, when a photograph of Beuys, nose bloodied and arm raised like that of a prize fighter, began to circulate. Beuys seized the opportunity, creating a heroic account of his life in the form of a fictional curriculum vitae, thus effectively transforming the utterly quotidian turn of events into a newly fashioned, near-legendary persona.

Beuys held his first solo performance one year later at the Galerie Schmela, in Dresden. *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* opened on November 26, 1965, and ever since, countless Beuys enthusiasts have come to regard this particular work his signature performance piece. Like a morbid soothsayer, Beuys sat himself in a store window, clad in felt and cast iron foot piece; while cradling a furry rabbit carcass, he carried out, with metronomic precision, a series of ritualistic, abstruse gestures, as though the fate of the world hinged on the mysterious rhythms of this scrappy pulpit. The work cinched what had been, up to that time, a growing fascination with Beuys by the international art world and public alike.



Other non-art, or found material that Beuys used in much of his sculpture and conceptual art was animal fat. Beuys used this organic material in both its liquid and solid states, the implicit potential for continual metamorphosis of the fat suggesting a great spiritual substance. By constructing art from something that was, fundamentally in and of itself, a life-sustaining material, Beuys spoke to people on both physically and psychologically visceral levels. This is evident in seminal works such as *Fat Corners* (1960) and *Fat Chair* (1964).

Much as Beuys had worked single-mindedly with drawing in the 1950s, he likewise steadily concentrated on manipulating felt throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, using it alternately as sculptural medium, sound insulator, and poetic metaphor. Works that epitomize this varied practice include *Homogenous Infiltration for Grand Piano* (1966), *Homogenous Infiltration for Cello* (1967), *The Pack* (1969), and *Felt Suit* (1970) - the latter work notably lacking Beuys's typically elaborate and/or metaphorical titles. *Felt Suit* was simply a quasi-cosmic turn of haberdashery, a simple men's suit tailored carefully after one of the artist's own. On having donned the suit for a 1970 performance, Beuys subsequently claimed that it symbolized "protection of the individual from the world," no less the fundamental isolation of the human condition.

Never the docile academic or administrator, Beuys was eventually dismissed from his professorship at the Kunstakademie (1972), indeed owing partly to his unorthodox practice of accepting anyone into his classroom. It was never that Beuys believed virtually anyone could qualify as an artist merely by attending art school; rather, Beuys simply maintained that anyone who wished to attend art school should have the right to do so, regardless of natural talent.

Beuys's art performances grew ever more elaborate throughout the 1970s. While continuing to utilize his already standard wares of felt, animals, and organic materials, he supplemented them with new elements in order to suggest new symbolic meanings, no less to infuse his own particular brand of "Conceptual Art" with a new visual syntax. For his 1974 performance *I Like America and America Likes Me*, Beuys traveled to New York City for a three-day stint at the Rene Block Gallery. Beuys sequestered himself in the space, having filled it earlier with various objects, such as straw, a triangle, a felt blanket (in which he would wrap himself) and a wild coyote. An extension of this conceptual montage into the everyday world was suggested in the artist's insistence on traveling to and from the gallery daily in a curtained ambulance, and his being conveyed by stretcher between the ambulance and the gallery (or his temporary residence) so that he would neither set foot on American soil nor ever directly lay eyes on the city.

Later Years and Death



Late in life, Beuys founded many political organizations - especially following his 1972 dismissal from his professorship - such as the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research (1974), and the German Green Party (1980). Beuys's art itself also gradually became more political, all the while continuing to be informed by his concept of "Social Sculpture," according to which the implicit message of any of his labors was that society itself was to be understood as the real "art work." This all-inclusive and contentious ideal is perhaps best reflected in the artist's *7000 Oaks* (1982-87), a work of land art, urbanization and environmentalism all in one.

Following a long illness, Beuys succumbed to heart failure on January 23, 1986 in Dusseldorf, not far from his place of birth. The trees of *7000 Oaks* continued to be planted by others after Beuys's death, thus implying the artist's continued presence well after his own soma had assumed a place in the realm of the invisible. Beuys remains, to this day, one of the few artists whose life and work continually spark debate and a sense of mystery over what constitutes art's legitimate province, and what might constitute the true limits of human expression.

LEGACY

Beuys's insistence on the fundamentally democratic nature of human creativity suggested that every fully thinking and feeling person is, by definition, an artist, has left a widely influential and creative legacy since his death in 1986. While Beuys had always made an impact on his fellow Fluxus colleagues since the early 1960s, he would ultimately come to play a larger role in lending credence to the notion, increasingly popular since the mid 1990s, that art should address social, political, and related concerns by blurring the boundaries between its own practice, as a professional discipline, and everyday reality. This meeting of the studio and the street, as it were, leads from Fluxus happenings to the ecological art of the more recent past, as well as a current generation's fascination for elements of chance, random encounter between an artist and her/his audience, the participation of the audience in the art work's completion over time, the incorporation of everyday materials within interactive installations and happenings, and so forth - indeed much of what has come to fall under the rubric, since the late 1990s, as "Relational Aesthetics" (see the book of the same name by French curator and art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud). Beuys has also made a lasting impact on environmental art, such as in the case of **Robert Smithson**, from the 1960s to the present.

Although the Fluxus movement of the 1960s was not formally founded by Beuys, it owes in large part its lasting legacy to his widely acknowledged practice and example. This is particularly the case in regard to Beuys's aesthetic of Social Sculpture, which suggested art's potential to transform the life of the individual observer, as well as the social condition of her/his larger culture. Beuys believed that if one were, by default, an artist, then one might be an artist everywhere, or in

every context in which one finds oneself - the art studio proper, the classroom, and the "street" offering equally advantageous circumstances for creative experience.

Original content written by Justin Wolf

ARTIST QUOTES

"I don't believe that an art school, which should stress new artistic concepts, should lay emphasis on fixed places to work in the school. That sort of thinking is tied up with the idea of art as a craft, with the work-bench and the drawing-table."

"Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline: to dismantle in order to build A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART."

"EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST who - from his state of freedom - the position of freedom that he experiences at first-hand - learns to determine the other positions in the TOTAL ART WORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER."

"Art can be learned, though a certain talent is a prerequisite, but hard work is part of the process. Art comes from intelligence, one must have something to say, but on the other side, that of capability, one must be able to express it."

"Their nomadic ways attracted me of course, although by that time their movements had been restricted. Yet it was they who discovered me in the snow after the crash, when the German search parties had given up. I was still unconscious then and only came round completely after twelve days or so, and by then I was back in a German field hospital. So the memories I have of that time are images that penetrated my consciousness." - Beuys' recollection of being rescued in Crimea in 1944

Major Works:



Title: Woman/Animal Skull (1956-1957)

Materials: Oil pigment, ink, turpentine and pencil on paper

Collection: Collection of Heiga and Walther Lauffs

Description: This work on paper dates from Beuys's early experimental phase, which was characterized by the artist's production of thousands of drawings under a self-imposed program of aesthetic asceticism. Beuys worked at this time mostly in solitude, as though under a strenuous search for self-enlightenment, simultaneously seeking a new artistic language that would combine the spiritual and the physical, the solid and the fluid, the ephemeral and the permanent. *Woman/Animal Skull* suggests a melding of the rational and the instinctual, or of the human and the animal minds out of a primordial state of organic chaos.



Title: Fat Chair (1964-1985)

Materials: Wood chair, animal fat

Collection: Estate of Joseph Beuys

Description: *Fat Chair* exemplifies how Beuys could turn two common materials of everyday life - here the organic components of fat and wood - into a composite, open-ended metaphor for the human body, its impermanent condition, and the tendencies for social life to conform to constructed convention. Created in 1964 and encased in a glass, temperature-controlled museum display case, *Fat Chair* subsequently underwent a slow, natural process of decay until 1985, by which time the fat had almost entirely decomposed and virtually evaporated. Through these basic organic compounds, viewers may well have imagined themselves occupying this chair, thus endowing *Fat Chair* with the status of a "proxy" for self-reflection on the transience of human life and the need to consciously and expeditiously channel one's own organic and-alas-ephemeral energies.



Title: How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare (November 26, 1965)

Materials: Gold leaf, honey, dead hare, felt pad, iron, fir tree, miscellaneous drawings and clothing items

Collection: Galerie Schmela, Dresden, Germany

Description: In this performance piece, Beuys could be viewed - his head and face covered in honey and gold leaf - through a gallery's windows, a slab of iron tied to one boot, a felt pad to the other, as the artist cradled a dead hare. As though carrying out a strange music (if not some macabre bedtime story), Beuys frequently whispered things to the animal carcass about his own drawings hanging on the walls around him. Beuys would periodically vary the bleak rhythm of this scenario by walking around the cramped space, one footstep muffled by the felt, the other amplified by the iron. Every item in the room - a wilting fir tree, the honey, the felt, and the fifty-dollars-worth of gold leaf - was chosen specifically for both its symbolic potential as well as its literal significance: honey for life, gold for wealth, hare as death, metal as conductor of invisible energies, felt as protection, and so forth. As for most of his subsequent installations and performance work, Beuys had created a new visual syntax not only for himself, but for all conceptual art that might follow him.



Title: Homogenous Infiltration for Grand Piano (1966)

Materials: Grand piano, felt

Collection: Georges Pompidou Center, Paris

Description: In simply wrapping a grand piano in utilitarian grey felt, Beuys encased a mammoth, sonic instrument normally employed for the creation of music, with a "bandage" that essentially muted and muzzled it. Like most of his works, the title reveals much of the idea behind it. "Homogenous" suggests that the composite work is, or has recently become, a singular item, something formerly sundered apart and healed, or made whole again. "Infiltration" may suggest one's desire to penetrate the felt skin and restore the instrument back to the practical realm of the everyday bourgeois living room, or recital hall. The entire ensemble (in the manner of a visual "chamber music") relates back to the artist's own experience after being shot out of the skies during war duties and the German nation's own desperate aspiration for a new kind of postwar, collective composure.



Title: The Pack (1969)

Materials: Volkswagen Bus (1961), 20 wooden sleds, each equipped with fat, rolled-up felt blanket, rope, flashlight, and leather belt

Collection: Staatliche Museen, Kassel, Germany

Description: As though it were an oblique self-portrait, there is arguably no other work by Beuys that is so intimately representative of the artist's healing fable by nomadic Tartars during World War II. Tethered to the Volkswagen Bus - a sure sign of an entire era of antiwar demonstration, international social upheaval, and underlying global nuclear Cold War dread - are twenty sleds, each equipped with what Beuys considered essential for personal survival of an unspecified (or unanticipated) human or natural calamity. Perhaps even more important, the sleds are *exiting* the bus, not being towed by it, as at first it may seem. This suggests that each sled is an independent and sentient entity, here released (or born) into the wild to find others in need of rescue.



Title: 7000 Oaks: City Forestation Instead of City Administration (1982-1987)

Materials: 7000 oak trees and 7000 basalt stones

Collection: Kassel, Germany

Description: The subtitle of this work indicates that *7,000 Oaks* was fundamentally a time-based, or "process" work of environmentalism and eco-urbanization. Beuys planted 7000 trees in the small, historic city of Kassel, Germany, over several years (carried out with the assistance of volunteers), each oak accompanied by a stone of basalt. Beuys's concerted effort to physically, spiritually and metaphorically alter the city's social spaces - economic, political, and cultural, among others - is what finally constituted a community-wide "social sculpture" (Beuys's own terminology). *7000 Oaks* officially began in 1982 at Documenta 7, the international exhibition of modern and contemporary art that is organized, by a guest curator, at Kassel every five years (since 1955). Beuys's own ecological "happening" drew to an official close five years later, at Documenta 8, after being continued by others for a full year after Beuys's own death.